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SUBJECT: FRANCE EVALUATING EU SANCTIONS ON UZBEKISTAN; FM KOUCHNER TO VISIT TASHKENT IN APRIL

REF: TASHKENT 177

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT FOR REASO
NS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: France is currently working with its EU partners to review the utility of ongoing EU sanctions on Uzbekistan, MFA officials told us on February 12. The sanctions come up for official review in May 2008. While France does not believe that the Karimov regime has made a radically positive shift, GOF officials do judge that some recent moves by Tashkent provide an opportunity to move away from isolation and towards increased dialogue. FM Kouchner will visit Tashkent in April 2008 as part of a tour of Central Asian capitals. In addition, France intends to launch its EU Presidency's Central Asia strategy during a meeting of their regional Ambassadors in Tashkent in July ¶2008. GOF officials would like further clarification of U.S. engagement strategy with Uzbekistan, more information on Congressional sanctions against Uzbekistan and would welcome dialogue with the U.S. on strategic security issues in the region. END SUMMARY

UZBEKISTAN & EU SANCTIONS

¶12. (C) Further implementation of the EU strategy on Central Asia will be an important element of France's EU Presidency according to several French government contacts. FM Kouchner intends to visit all five Central Asian capitals in April 2008 as part of France's preparations for the Presidency. In addition, France plans to host its five ambassadors to the region in Tashkent in July 2008 (when France becomes EU president) to call attention to the implementation of the EU's Central Asia strategy. Choosing Tashkent, we are told, is no accident. The GOF strongly believes that further isolation of Uzbekistan is not in the interest of the international community.

¶13. (C) While Paris is not prepared to say that France will seek the full lifting of EU sanctions in May 2008 (when the sanctions next come up for official review), it is clear that an exhaustive evaluation with EU partners is now underway (reftel). Pierre Morel, the EU's Special Representative for Central Asia, was also in Paris this week to discuss, among other things, Tashkent's progress on human rights issues. (Note: Morel is a former French Ambassador and stays closely connected to the French MFA.) MFA officials asked for clarification of the U.S. position on engagement with Uzbekistan and more information on U.S. Congressional

sanctions.

¶4. (C) Paris is pleased with Tashkent's recent release of six political prisoners (particularly since the releases were seen as a direct result of EU intervention), as well as Uzbekistan's decision to suspend the death penalty. While GOF officials say they do not see a radical shift by the Karimov regime, they are cautiously optimistic that these recent moves can provide an opportunity for increasing dialogue and avoiding further isolation of a strategically significant country in the region. GOF officials say human rights issues remain extremely important for the EU, and note that Tashkent is beginning to accept this reality. For example, Karimov preemptively addressed the Andijan tragedy himself during his last meeting with Morel. Though French officials are moving away from isolation, many in the GOF note that they remain attentive to Karimov's "paranoid and unpredictable" behavior.

SECURITY FORUM

¶5. (C) It is worth noting that Tashkent (along with the other four Central Asian countries) will also be invited to a Ministerial level "Security Forum" that the French intend to host in Paris in September 2008. The idea, as described by GOF officials, is to create an EU/Central Asia dialogue on strategic security issues, including energy security, narcotics trafficking, human trafficking, environmental issues, and Islamic extremism. Human rights issues will not be ignored, and will have a role in the security talks, we were told. The GOF is very interested in U.S.' strategic thinking on Central Asia and would welcome further dialogue

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with the U.S. on the way forward -- though preferably in the immediate future. With only six months as the EU President, France hopes to move quickly towards implementation after it assumes the presidency, and is now in full preparation mode.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) While in the past France has largely left Central Asia policy to the Germans, it is clear that the GOF intends to play a larger role in Central Asia strategy during its July-December 2008 EU Presidency. If the U.S. wants to influence French thinking on Central Asia policy (in particular on Uzbekistan, and regional security issues), the coming 60 days appear to be the most crucial period for engagement, i.e. ahead of FM Kouchner's visit to the region, and before France formally takes up the Presidency on July 1, 2008.

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